

### Amendments to the Claims

Please amend the claims as follows:

1. (currently amended) A safety stopper for use with a conventional welding torch striker, the striker having a substantially U-shaped spring handle, the spring handle defining a first arm with a first push-tab and a second arm with a second push-tab, the arms formed as one piece with a bend at a proximal end of the striker, a strike plate mounted to a distal end of the first arm, and a flint mounted to a distal end of the second arm, the spring handle and the strike plate defining an open area, the safety stopper comprising:  
a sleeve made of a flexible, non-flammable, heat-resistant material;  
wherein the sleeve is shaped to enclose a central portion of both arms, while providing space for relative movement within the sleeve of the first push-tab with respect to the second push-tab;  
wherein the sleeve is sized for retention on the arms by spring force exerted outward on the sleeve by the arms; and  
wherein the sleeve is shaped to cover a substantial portion of the open area, ~~while exposing~~ and to expose the strike plate and the flint;  
such that the safety stopper, when attached to the striker, defines a clear path for movement of the strike plate with respect to the flint;  
such that the safety stopper allows manual operation of the striker while the safety stopper is attached to the striker; and  
such that the safety stopper reduces the chances of the operator being thrown off balance by the striker catching on an external object when the striker, with the safety stopper attached, is carried hands-free attached to an operator's belt.
2. (original) A safety stopper according to claim 1, wherein the sleeve is formed of a single sheet of material folded to produce a fold and first and second open edges, the first and second open edges attached by stitching.
3. (original) A safety stopper according to claim 2, wherein the sleeve is made of leather.
4. (original) A safety stopper according to claim 1, wherein the bend at the proximal end of the striker protrudes beyond the proximal end of the sleeve.

5. (original) A safety stopper according to claim 1, further comprising at least one pouch attached to the sleeve.
6. (withdrawn-original) A safety stopper according to claim 5, wherein at least one pouch is made of leather.
7. (withdrawn-currently amended) A safety stopper ~~for use with a welding torch striker, the striker having a substantially U-shaped spring handle, the spring handle defining a first arm with a first push-tab and a second arm with a second push-tab, the arms formed as one piece with a bend at a proximal end of the striker, a strike plate mounted to a distal end of the first arm, and a flint mounted to a distal end of the second arm, the spring handle and the strike plate defining an open area, the safety stopper comprising:~~  
a sock according to claim 19, wherein the sock is made of a flexible, non-flammable, heat-resistant material;  
wherein the sock is shaped to enclose a proximate and central portion of both arms, while providing space for relative movement within the sock of the first push-tab with respect to the second push-tab;  
wherein the sock is shaped to cover a substantial portion of the open area, while exposing the strike plate and the flint; and  
wherein the sock is attached to the striker by at least one rivet penetrating the sock.
8. (withdrawn- original) A safety stopper according to claim 7, wherein the at least one rivet penetrates the sock near the sock's distal open end.
9. (withdrawn-currently amended) A safety stopper according to claim 7, further comprising a grommet, wherein the ~~at least one~~ grommet penetrates the sock near the sock's proximal closed end.
10. (withdrawn- currently amended) A safety stopper ~~for use with a welding torch striker, the striker having a substantially U-shaped spring handle, the spring handle defining a first arm with a first push-tab and a second arm with a second push-tab, the arms formed as one piece with a bend at a proximal end of the striker, a strike plate mounted to a distal end of the first arm, and a flint mounted to a distal end of the second arm, the spring handle and the strike plate defining an open area,~~ according to claim 19, the safety stopper further comprising ~~comprising:~~ a rigid plate made of a non-flammable, heat-resistant material shaped to cover a substantial portion of the open area, while exposing the strike plate and the flint.

11. (withdrawn-currently amended) A safety stopper according to claim ~~11~~ 10, further comprising at least one clip-on fastener adapted to clip the rigid plate to a portion of the spring handle proximate to the bend.
12. (withdrawn-original) A safety stopper according to claim 11, wherein the at least one clip-on fastener is two clip-on fasteners.
13. (withdrawn-original) A safety stopper according to claim 10, wherein the rigid plate has at least one peripheral groove along a first long edge.
14. (withdrawn-original) A safety stopper according to claim 13, wherein a portion of the peripheral groove is adapted to secure the proximal end of the rigid plate within the bend of the striker.
15. (withdrawn-original) A safety stopper according to claim 13, wherein the rigid plate includes an overlapping portion along its second long edge.
16. (withdrawn-original) A safety stopper according to claim 10, further comprising a second rigid plate, the two rigid plates configured for clamp-on attachment of the plates to the striker.
17. (withdrawn-original) A safety stopper according to claim 16, wherein the first rigid plate has at least one integral spacer and the second rigid plate has at least one socket sized to accept the at least one integral spacer.
18. (withdrawn-original) A safety stopper according to claim 10, wherein the rigid plate is a metal plate tack-welded to one of the two arms, and mounted in sliding, overlapping relationship to the other one of the two arms.
19. (withdrawn-currently amended) A safety stopper for use with a welding torch striker, the striker having a substantially U-shaped spring handle, the spring handle defining a first arm with a first push-tab and a strike plate mounted to a distal end of the first arm, and a second arm with a second push-tab and a flint mounted to a distal end of the second arm, the arms joined to form a bend at a proximal end of the striker, ~~at least one flint mounted to a distal end of the first arm, and a strike plate mounted to a distal end of the second arm~~, the spring handle and the strike plate defining an open area, the safety stopper ~~comprising:~~ adapted for attachment to the striker, the safety stopper including a cover wherein said cover is a structure selected from the group consisting of a sleeve, a sock, a plate and a molded web, and wherein said is shaped to cover a substantial portion of the open area, and shaped to expose the strike plate and the at least one flint; and

~~attachment means for attaching the cover to the striker~~ such that the safety stopper, when attached to the striker, defines a clear path for movement of ~~a first push-tab~~ the strike plate with respect to a ~~second push-tab~~ the flint;

such that the safety stopper allows manual operation of the striker while the safety stopper is attached to the striker; and

~~such that when the striker, with the safety stopper attached, is carried hands-free attached to an operator's belt,~~ the safety stopper reduces the chances of the operator being thrown off balance by the striker catching on an external object when the striker, with the safety stopper attached, is carried hands-free attached to an operator's belt.

20. (withdrawn-original) A safety stopper for use with a hand tool defining an open area, the safety stopper comprising, in combination, a cover shaped to cover a substantial portion of the open area and shaped to expose an active component of the tool; and attachment means for attaching the cover to the tool; such that the safety stopper when attached to the tool defines a clear path for movement of a trigger component of the tool; and such that when the tool with the safety stopper attached is carried hands-free attached to an operator's belt, the safety stopper reduces the chances of the operator being thrown off balance by the tool catching on an external object.
21. (withdrawn-original) A welding torch striker with safety stopper, comprising:  
a substantially U-shaped spring handle, the spring handle defining a first arm with a first push-tab and a second arm with a second push-tab, the arms formed as one piece with a bend at a proximal end of the striker;  
a strike plate mounted to a distal end of the first arm, the spring handle and the strike plate defining an open area;  
a flint mounted to a distal end of the second arm; and  
a safety stopper attached to the spring handle and configured to cover a substantial portion of the open area, while exposing the strike plate and the flint.
22. (withdrawn-currently amended) A welding torch striker with safety stopper according to claim 21 19, wherein the safety stopper is formed as a one-piece integral safety stopper including a web, a first handle-grip, and a second handle-grip;  
wherein the web extends between the first handle-grip and the second handle-grip; and  
wherein the first handle-grip surrounds a portion of the first arm and the second handle-grip surrounds a portion of the second arm.

23. (withdrawn-original) A welding torch striker with safety stopper according to claim 22, wherein the integral safety stopper is made of a flexible, non-flammable, high-temperature resistant rubber.
24. (withdrawn-original) A welding torch striker with integral safety stopper according to claim 23, wherein the integral safety stopper is made by injection molding.
25. (withdrawn-original) A welding torch striker with safety stopper according to claim 24, further comprising at least one pouch formed as part of the one-piece integral safety stopper.
26. (withdrawn-original) A welding torch striker with safety stopper according to claim 22, further comprising at least one pouch made of leather attached to the integral safety stopper.
27. (withdrawn-currently amended) A welding torch striker with safety stopper according to claim 21, wherein the safety stopper is shaped as a sock, and wherein the sock is attached to the spring handle by a fastener penetrating the sock near the sock's closed end and passing through the coil of the spring handle.
28. (withdrawn- currently amended) A welding torch striker with safety stopper according to claim ~~24~~ 31, wherein the safety stopper includes a rigid plate attached to one of the first and second arms such that the rigid plate may move in sliding, overlapping relationship to the other arm of the first and second arms.
29. (withdrawn-original) A welding torch striker with safety stopper according to claim 28, wherein the rigid plate is a metal plate tack-welded to the one of the first and second arms.
30. (withdrawn-currently amended) A welding torch striker with safety stopper according to claim ~~24~~ 31, wherein the safety stopper includes two rigid plates clamped onto the striker.
31. (currently amended) A safety welding torch striker with safety stopper, comprising:  
a substantially U-shaped spring handle, the spring handle defining a first arm with a first push-tab and a strike plate mounted to a distal end of the first arm, and a second arm with a second push-tab and a flint mounted to a distal end of the second arm, the arms joined to form a bend at a proximal end of the ~~striker;~~ striker,  
~~at least one flint mounted to a distal end of the first arm;~~  
~~a strike plate mounted to a distal end of the second arm,~~ the spring handle and the strike plate defining an open area; and  
a safety stopper adapted for attachment to the striker, the safety stopper including a cover having a tough outer face, wherein said cover is a structure selected from the group consisting of a sleeve,

a sock, a plate and a molded web, and the wherein said cover is configured shaped to cover a substantial portion of the open area and to expose the strike plate and the at least one flint; such that the safety stopper, when attached to the striker, defines a clear path for movement of the strike plate with respect to the flint;

such that the safety stopper allows manual operation of the striker while the safety stopper is attached to the striker; and

such that the safety stopper reduces the chances of the operator being thrown off balance by the striker catching on an external object when the striker, with the safety stopper attached, is carried hands-free attached to an operator's belt.

~~such that when an operator is carrying the striker hands-free with the striker attached to the operator's belt, and such that the cover reduces the chances of the striker catching on an external object.~~

32. (currently amended) A safety stopper for use with a conventional welding torch striker, the striker having a substantially U-shaped spring handle, the spring handle defining a first arm with a first push-tab and a second arm with a second push-tab, the arms formed as one piece with a bend at a proximal end of the striker, a strike plate mounted to a distal end of the first arm, and a flint mounted to a distal end of the second arm, the spring handle and the strike plate defining an open area, the safety stopper comprising:

a sleeve made of a flexible, non-flammable, heat-resistant material;

wherein the sleeve is shaped to enclose a central portion of both arms, while providing space for relative movement within the sleeve of the first push-tab with respect to the second push-tab;

wherein the sleeve is shaped and sized for retention on the arms by enclosing a central portion of both arms; and

wherein the sleeve is shaped to cover a substantial portion of the open area, while exposing the strike plate and the flint;

such that the safety stopper, when attached to the striker, defines a clear path for movement of the strike plate with respect to the flint such that the safety stopper allows manual operation of the striker while the safety stopper is attached to the striker; and

such that the safety stopper reduces the chances of the operator being thrown off balance by the striker catching on an external object when the striker, with the safety stopper attached, is carried hands-free attached to an operator's belt.

33. (withdrawn-previously presented) A safety stopper according to claim 32, wherein the sleeve is formed of a single sheet of material folded to produce a fold and first and second open edges, the first and second open edges attached by stitching.
34. (withdrawn-previously presented) A safety stopper according to claim 33, wherein the sleeve is made of leather.
35. (withdrawn-previously presented) A safety stopper according to claim 32, wherein the bend at the proximal end of the striker protrudes beyond the proximal end of the sleeve.
36. (withdrawn-previously presented) A safety stopper according to claim 32, further comprising at least one pouch attached to the sleeve.
37. (withdrawn-previously presented) A safety stopper according to claim 36, wherein at least one pouch is made of leather.